

# House endorses CHIP expansion

**By The Associated Press - IR State Bureau - 04/27/07**

HELENA (AP) — The House endorsed increasing government-funded health insurance for children Thursday.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Dan Weinberg, D-Whitefish, would expand the Children's Health Insurance Program to cover children living below 175 percent of the federal poverty line.

Children currently have to live at 150 percent below the poverty line to be eligible. For a family of four, it would mean a jump in eligibility from households making about \$30,000 a year to those making about \$35,000. State officials estimate that at least 2,000 more children would be eligible statewide for the program, which currently insures about 13,000 kids.

A handful of Republicans joined Democrats to vote 61-39 in favor of the bill. Supporters said expanding CHIP was a great investment that would keep overall public health care costs down.

"We'll pay now or we'll pay later," said Rep. Sue Dickenson, D-Great Falls. "This makes good sense."

Critics said expanding CHIP wasn't necessary because there are still open spots at the current funding level. Others said CHIP, which is mostly funded by the federal government, was unfair to future generations because it inflated the federal budget.

"What about the children who aren't born yet, who are going to be saddled with this debt?" asked Rep. Rick Jore, C-Ronan.

The measure faces a final vote in the House before being sent to the governor's desk.

The funding for the measure, nearly \$2 million over the next two years, is in a separate bill. The bill also includes a provision to reduce the number of children eligible if the state determines there wouldn't be enough funding.

The bill is Senate Bill 22.